

C.G.S. ALASKA, 1915-1916

by David R. Gray

In the Spring 1979 edition we left the C.G.S. ALASKA snug in her winter quarters at Baillie Island on the south coast of Amundsen Gulf, 360 miles west of the Canadian Arctic Expedition base at Bernard Harbour. On board were Captain Daniel Sweeney, who had joined as master the previous winter; Daniel Blue, engineer; and Mike, their Inuit assistant.

The year of 1915 began with a visitor, Fred Jacobsen, who brought them the first news of the great war. Several days in January were spent building a snow-house around the stern to keep the men warm while they dug down through the ice to the propellor. Blue hoped to remove the propellor and cut it down to a more appropriate size for the ALASKA. However, the hole filled with water and the project was abandoned. In late January they took an Inuit woman, Ungayou, on board for medical attention as they were afraid she would die of her illness if left ashore. Two weeks later, following her recovery, she and Captain Sweeney were married according to the local Inuit custom. In mid-February, Blue discovered what seemed to be traces of scurvy. Eventually all three of ALASKA's crew, other whites wintering along the coast, and several Inuit were afflicted. They suspected scurvy because of the lack of variety in their diet, and began eating more meat. In a somewhat ironic switch of roles, Blue was able to purchase "scurvy medicine"; citric acid, from the local natives, and the problem cleared up as long as the medicine and fresh meat lasted. Though they were able to carry on with the normal activities of huting and fox-trapping, they were weakened by the "sickness". In April Blue went ptarmigan hunting with Jacobsen, but returned riding on a sled and apparently suffering from pneumonia. Daniel Blue, chief engineer of the ALASKA, died on 2 May 1915 after an illness of ten days.

ALASKA came up out of her winter bed in the ice on 15 May and preparations began for her summer trip. With only two men to take her west, Sweeney was worried about the absence of Dr. Anderson who was to go with ALASKA. Soon though, Ikey Bolt and Palaiyak arrived from Bernard Harbour with the expedition's outgoing mail. Anderson had gone east with another survey party. Ikey and Palaiyak were soon at work boiling polar bear skulls for the Museum in Ottawa, while Mike and Jacobsen began the long, frustrating job of getting ALASKA's engine running. Twenty-three days later, Jacobsen was paid off with \$5.00 cash, 4 sacks of flour, 1 lb. of tobacco, 2 lb. of soap and the late Mr. Blue's caribou skin shirt. But the engine was still not running. Eventually it was decided that the gasoline brought in last year was at fault and that they would have to sail to Herschel Island. The ice left the shore on 10 July and ALASKA had her first grounding of 1915 as she tried to go out of the harbour. She worked her way through the ice for three days, spent eight hours hung up on a reef, and finally reached Herschel Island. At Herschel, the engineer of the GLADIATOR began work on ALASKA's engine. Three days and \$50.00 later, it was finally in running order. When the long-awaited expedition cargo arrived on the RUBY on 21 August, the crew worked until midnight to get ALASKA loaded and they put to sea at 2 a.m. On board were a new engineer, Mr. J.E. Hoff, Mike's wife and children, three other Inuit, and Corporal W.V. Bruce of the R.N.W.M.P. who was to investigate the disappearance of two priests thought to have been killed by Inuit. ALASKA arrived at Bernard Harbour on 5 September in company with the missionary boat ATKOON.

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After discharging cargo, C.G.S. ALASKA went back west to look for driftwood, as the amount of coal brought in was smaller than expected. The expedition's marine biologist went along and got some valuable soundings down to 50 fathoms in Dolphin and Union Strait and obtained a quantity of specimens by dredging from greater depths than he had been able to reach before. On 22 September the harbour froze over and ALASKA was placed in position for the winter. However, on 6 October, ALASKA started out from the harbour again to go east for Anderson's survey party. She broke through the young ice to the open strait but was forced back by the fast-forming mush ice. When Dr. Anderson's party had not appeared by 4 November, Captain Sweeney set out on a sledge journey to find them, returning on 22 November. Meanwhile the overdue explorers had arrived back at Bernard Harbour on 9 November.

Throughout the winter, the crew of the ALASKA helped the scientists in their many tasks; from taking weather observations and tidal measurements to trapping mammals and preparing specimens. Christmas 1915 was celebrated with the aid of the 1914 Christmas Box which had finally arrived with the RUBY in the Fall.

In January reports were prepared, specimens of wolverines and muskoxen purchased from visiting Inuit, details of Inuit life were recorded, and preparations were made for winter trips. Survey parties headed east to search for muskoxen and copper deposits, and north to Victoria Island for anthropological studies. On 18 April the first Snow Bunting of the season flew around ALASKA, marking the end of her third winter in the ice. All of the expedition parties returned by early June. The R.N.W.M.P. officers had returned with two prisoners to go to the Herschel Island post in the ALASKA. The melt was ahead of the previous year and after several days of cutting and blasting, ALASKA floated free on 23 June.

Space was a problem as they had twenty-seven people on the small schooner; six scientists, a crew of three, two R.N.W.M.P. officers, fourteen Inuit employees and two Inuit prisoners; and 25 dogs. In addition to the expedition collections and equipment, there was the Inuits' personal gear, stores for paying off native employees, and enough provisions for another wintering if ice conditions prevented them from sailing to Nome. Sporting a bright new coat of paint, the ALASKA left Bernard Harbour 13 July, 1916. After briefly working through some loose ice, their progress was stopped for several days by masses of heavy floating ice. On 16 July, while ALASKA was moving through thick fog near Victoria Island, Mrs. Sweeney gave birth to a son, Daniel, Jr. That day a fresh wind and a heavy swell led to considerable sea sickness on board. Two days later they ran aground again while trying to go between the shore and grounded ice. Dr. R.M. Anderson's daily journal provides the details of these almost daily adventures. "Tide fell rapidly in afternoon and left us grounded in about 4 feet of water. Tide began to rise about 6 p.m. and we floated up and kedged the vessel off about 8.45 p.m. moving up and tying to another grounded cake of ice. We tie up by unning alongside of the ice, and jumping out with a boat anchor or grappling hook which is engaged in a ridge or crack or hole chopped in the ice." ALASKA got under way again the evening of 21 July, and worked out into a broad lead of open water. From her westward, the ocean was practically open.

At Baillie Island a strong gale nearly swept ALASKA's dory out to sea and some of the Inuit had to spend the night ashore. The next morning the crew let the dory drift

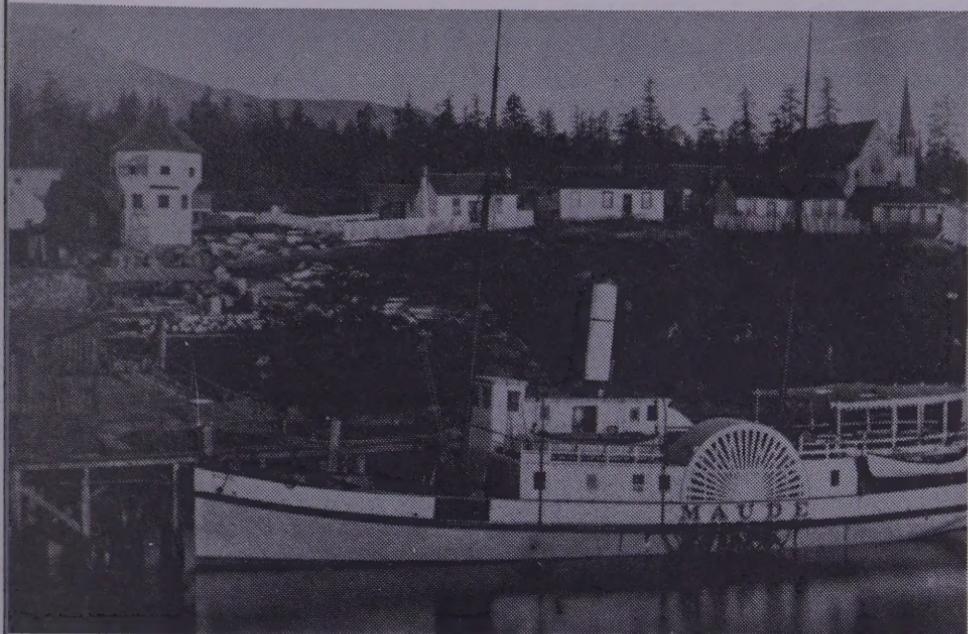
ashore at the end of a tow line and the passengers were thus hauled back on board. "Saw a large Polar Bear swimming in the sea about 2 miles west of Baillie Island. We turned about 400 yards out of our course to run close to him and every camera on board . . . took snap shots at him. The bear swam almost as fast as the ship went (about 6 miles per hour) and piled the foam up ahead of beam, leaving a wake like a steam boat." ALASKA arrived at Herschel Island on 28 August. The native employees were paid off and the stores, equipment, and mail for the Northern Party were assembled for sending north.

The ALASKA was much less crowded when she left Herschel Island, with only three crew members and six scientists on board. ALASKA encountered heavy ice practically all the way from the international boundary to Point Barrow, Alaska. After passing the point, ALASKA suddenly ran into trouble. "Ship leaking suddenly worse than usual, and engine room flooded. Pump not working well. Engine finally stopped. Engineer became discouraged and claimed he could do nothing to start up again, but after quite a bit of dragging around Sweeney . . . got the limber-chains pulled through, and we then pumped the water down a little. Engineer then started engine again, and we reached Point Hope." Continuing across the outside of Kotzebue Sound, they passed into the Bering Sea at the beginning of a heavy gale, on the evening of 11 August. "Crept along the coast in a terrific gale blowing straight down from the precipitous cliffs. It was about all we could do to hold up to it. Sometimes we would fall off a little and start to drift across the Bering sea, but ultimately headed the ship's nose into a little bight . . . and dropped both anchors." As the gale continued, they were forced to anchor for some time under the cliffs at Tin City and again behind Sledge Island.

ALASKA finally reached Nome again on 15 August, 1916. Although the weather was still rough, the cargo was put ashore that day. It was too rough to make any repairs on the vessel, and as it was even rougher the next day, ALASKA was compelled to run 16 miles over to the shelter of Sledge Island again. Three sailors were engaged to relieve the six scientists from seaman's duty. They had all been doing watch as deck officers from Bernard Harbour to Herschel Island with the Inuit crew, and from Herschel Island to Nome the duties had been much heavier. The ALASKA was hauled up on the beach at Nome, in good shape except for the engine and the leakage around the stuffing-box. The extensive collections made by the party in geology, ethnology, biology, and photography, and the records of the Southern Party, were thus landed safely at Nome. It was considered much safer to send the results of the expedition's three years of work out by regular steamship service than to risk taking them down to Victoria on the ALASKA in the autumn season. The 173 pieces of expedition freight and the members of the Southern Party left Nome on 27 August on the S.S.

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THE BULLETIN is published by the Maritime Museum of British Columbia, 28 Bastion Square, Victoria, B.C. V8W 1H9. Readers are encouraged to submit articles for publication. THE BULLETIN is distributed to members of the Museum Society. Additional copies and back issues (if available) may be purchased at the Museum.



One of the Nanaimo colliery sites in 1872 with a customer, the paddlesteamer MAUDE, alongside. The blockhouse remains today in the City of Nanaimo, Vancouver Island.

Black Stones

by R.R. Godden

The story is told by historian H.H. Bancroft that a group of Quackoll Indians from the northern end of Vancouver's Island watched with interest one day in 1835 as the blacksmith at the Hudson's Bay Company Fort McLoughlin on Milbanke Sound piled some "black stones" on the fire in his forge and quickly brought them to the desired heat for his metal working. The Indians were first amused then openly delighted as they found a flaw in the onmipotence of the white man's knowledge when they were told that the 'stones' were brought by ship across the sea from Wales. They knew, they said, where "black stones" could be had for easy digging near their village.

This casual revelation of the presence of coal on the Island had considerable significance for the Hudson's Bay authorities when in due course it was confirmed by Captain McNeil of the steamer BEAVER. The Company sensed a new enterprise to offset the declining fur harvest. The prospective consumers and customers would be their own steamer and the Royal Navy. The discovery was accordingly made known to Captain Duntze in HMS FISGARD who caused it to be investigated by Captain Gordon in the steam sloop CORMORANT. The coal found at the place named firstly McNeill Harbour and later Beaver Harbour on Vancouver Island's northeast shore (near today's Port Hardy) was found suitable for use in steamships. A report, with samples, was duly forwarded to the Admiralty in 1847.

To develop and protect a profit-making opportunity, the HBC proceeded to ensure nonopoly of the coalfields by establishing Fort Rupert at the location of the coal find. To work the coal seams, miners were brought out from England in 1849, arriving at

distance downstream from the ship, passing outside the hull and continuing at an angle to the shore upstream. This channel was kept open daily despite knee-deep snow and ice. The precautions proved successful when the thaw came. Practicing the preparedness motto of scouting, the Assistant Scoutmaster had moved ashore in the interim.

In 1916, the Scouts relinquished their charge to Captain Harry W. Crosby of Seattle who in turn sold her to Captain C. Wicke of San Francisco. During 1917 CASCO did some salvage work. Sailing in 1918 on his honeymoon voyage to the South Sea Islands, Captain Wicke almost lost his bride when a shark pulled her overboard when she was fishing. Leaping into the water after her, Captain Wicke stabbed the shark and saved her life. Returned to San Francisco in 1919, Captain Wicke operated CASCO for a local cod fishing company. In April of 1919 CASCO carried a cargo of salt to the Aleutians for the fishing company.

On 1 June, 1919 CASCO sailed from San Francisco on what would be her last voyage. Under command of Captain C.L. Oliver and carrying 27 miners and sailors on a gold hunting expedition to Siberia, she reached Nome in 42 days. She was then headed for the Kolyma River in Siberia. Reaching Kolchin Bay with considerable difficulty caused by shallow water and drift ice, CASCO was forced to return eastward. It was decided to return to San Francisco for the winter. On 8 September the vessel was driven hard ashore on King Island in the Bering Sea and all hands abandoned ship in favour of some deserted houses on the island. After waiting in vain for help, six men set out in an open skin boat on 19 September for Nome, some 60 miles distant. On arrival they reported the plight of their shipmates and the U.S. Revenue Cutter BEAR, under Captain C.S. Cochran, was despatched to their rescue. CASCO was beyond salvage.

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NORTHWESTERN and reached Seattle on 11 September 1916. Anderson returned to Victoria, B.C. on the S.S. SOL DUC and, with the Naval Stores Officer at H.M.C. Dockyard, Esquimalt, wound up all the administrative affairs of Canada's first major scientific expedition to the Arctic.

Before leaving Nome however, Anderson had in his own way completed another important aspect of his expedition. Down on the beach where ALASKA was hauled up, he had taken pictures of the ship from all angles, his way of saying good-bye perhaps, to the ship that had served his expedition for four years. In her time as C.G.S. ALASKA she had carried scientists and missionaries, a newborn baby and suspected murderers, and had witnessed both a funeral and a baptism. ALASKA had had her troubles with shallow waters, a balky engine, and the Arctic ice, but she successfully completed her mission as flagship of the Southern Party of the Canadian Arctic Expedition.